

THE ROLE OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN DEFEATING THE ISLAMIC STATE
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract

This research study examines how Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) performed their core competencies to dismantle and defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and why these capabilities were not just applicable to the battlefields of Iraq and Syria but will also have wide reaching application across the spectrum of potential conflicts in the 21st century. The study explains why the Department of Defense (DoD) chose SOF as the primary ground component to accomplish the destruction of ISIS as US officials and DoD planners contended with limitations imposed upon the number of service members and resources that would be available to them. The resulting SOF-centric approach or Strategy of Lightness employed during Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) utilized Special Forces (SF), Civil Affairs (CA), and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) as part of a holistic design that encompassed their Foreign Internal Defense, Support to Governance, and Information Operations competencies. These three SOF branches with their demonstrated core competencies will be increasingly employed in the future, from peacekeeping to Great Power Competition.

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Introduction

On September 10, 2014 President Barack Obama announced his intention to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.”¹ His statement signaled to the nation and the world that the U.S. possessed the political will to formally act against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Operation Inherent Resolve was officially conceived, but a precise strategy still needed to be devised and implemented to achieve the stated outcome. The US needed to decide the ways and means with which to fight ISIS.

ISIS emerged from the ashes of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and went on to take the region by storm. The Iraqi Army (IA) and other security forces seemed to disintegrate in their path as ISIS went on to seize Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, in the summer of 2014. The group was further enabled by the instability caused by the on-going Syrian Civil War. Throughout 2014 and 2015 ISIS sought to create a new Islamic caliphate across northern and eastern Syria, northern Iraq, and beyond. They committed horrific atrocities against the populations trapped inside of the territory under their control and provided inspiration for terror attacks across the West. Refugees from Iraq and the Syria flooded neighboring countries and contributed to destabilizing the region, from the Levant to Europe.

The post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were heavy in their cost of blood and treasure in the eyes of the American people. The continual deployment of tens of thousands of US service members to the Middle East region to fight against insurgencies strained the Department of Defense (DoD). The toll of providing this manpower diverted from other priorities such as retaining conventional warfighting competencies and modernization programs. However, the rise

¹ Office of the Press Secretary. “Statement by the President on ISIL.” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

of ISIS in the aftermath of the US withdraw from Iraq left policymakers with a conundrum. The US could no longer ignore the atrocities committed by the group. Its continued spread would further destabilize the region and add to the on-going humanitarian disaster. US public opinion increasingly supported action against the self-proclaimed caliphate, yet the population was also wary of yet another major costly intervention.²

The DoD possessed a unique formation with the capabilities necessary to succeed without committing large amounts of ground troops. Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) is composed of Special Forces (SF), Civil Affairs (CA), and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) soldiers. These operators serve as “force multipliers” who work by, with, and through indigenous partners to accomplish their mission. SF waged Foreign Internal Defense (FID). CA specialized in providing support to Governance. PSYOP performed Information Operations to shape conditions. These special warfare competencies are complementary in that they cultivate relationships with partner forces and seek shared security interests.³ They worked in concert to achieve operational and strategic effects in the campaign against ISIS.

Operations needed to commence before ISIS further consolidated and expanded its control over large swaths of northern Iraq and across Syria. By the fall of 2015 President Obama announced that SOF would expand its operational reach into Syria and therefore the scope of US involvement in the conflict.⁴ SOF units were tasked with establishing relationships with the

² Pew Research Center. “Support for U.S. Campaign Against ISIS; Doubts about its Effectiveness, Objectives.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/10/22/support-for-u-s-campaign-against-isis-doubts-about-its-effectiveness-objectives/>.

³ U.S. Army Special Operations Command. *ARSOF 2022*. Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2017, pg. 13.

⁴ Baker, Peter, Helene Cooper, and David E. Sanger. “U.S. Troops Sent to Syria to Aid Forces Fighting ISIS: Deepening Involvement, President Orders Commandos to Advise Local Groups.” *The New York Times*, Oct 21, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/31/world/obama-will-send-forces-to-syria-to-help-fight-the-islamic-state.html>.

Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and other local forces. Their mission was to advise and assist to achieve tactical gains on the battlefield and alter the tide of the conflict. They were aided in this endeavor by US intelligence, logistical support, and Close Air Support (CAS).⁵

The following year witnessed the gradual increase of SOF personnel in the region and the expansion of their capabilities leveraged against ISIS. The operators quietly began augmenting Iraqi and Kurdish forces on both sides of the Iraqi and Syrian border and made their presence felt against ISIS. In May 2016, the first photographs publicly emerged of SOF accompanying YPG forces inside of Syria. They were taken a mere 40 miles from Raqqa, the self-declared capital of the Islamic State.⁶ A year and half later commander of CENTCOM Lt. Gen. Paul E. Funk II announced in a press release, "over 61,500 square kilometers of territory was liberated from ISIS across Iraq and Syria, meaning 'more than 98 percent of the land once claimed by the terrorist group has been returned... more than 4.5 million people were liberated from ISIS oppression in 2017, leading to [the liberation of] of 7.7 million people over the three years of OIR.'"⁷

This research study will investigate how the three SOF branches of SF, CA, and PSYOP and their core competencies of Foreign Internal Defense, Support to Governance, and Information Operations were all instrumental in achieving this success. This feat was even more noteworthy as it employed a Strategy of Lightness and did not rely upon many conventional US military strengths. Finally, each capability is individually discussed regarding its applicability to plausible conflicts or scenarios that SOF might contend with in the foreseeable future.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Ackerman, Spencer. "US Military Special Forces Pictured Aiding Kurdish Fighters in Syria." *The Guardian*, May 26, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/26/us-military-photos-syria-soldiers-fighting-isis>.

⁷ Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve. "US, Coalition Forces Ready to Ensure the Enduring Defeat of ISIS in 2018." <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/1409327/us-coalition-forces-ready-to-ensure-the-enduring-defeat-of-isis-in-2018/>.

Literature Review

The US campaign against ISIS is in its seventh year and still on-going. The final chapter to OIR has not yet been written. Nonetheless, the years after 2014 produced a number of primary and secondary sources that documented the Special Operations Forces (SOF) contribution in the offensive against ISIS. Modern technology allowed the near instantaneous transfer of information from the battlefields of Iraq and Syria half a world away through various Department of Defense (DoD) organizations. Both public and private entities secured access to information after it was collated, processed, and released for consumption.

The DoD and other US government agencies are not the only sources of information concerning the SOF role in OIR. Various academic, research, and media outlets had access to Iraq and Syria and developed relationships with the individuals and organizations shaping events on the ground. Reporters, conflict journalists, and non-government organizations (NGOs) possessed physical access or digital connectivity to those participating or affected by the conflict. All of these sources assisted in constructing a modern history of the contribution of SOF to the rapid dismantling of the short-lived ISIS caliphate and provide lessons for the future.

The Case for the SOF Approach

The prelude to the US involvement in Iraq and Syria in 2014 generated much discussion and debate about the most effective approach. Some analysts argued that SOF should increase its advising and assisting efforts to local forces already battling ISIS. Linda Robinson recognized this approach and noted that the indigenous forces fighting against ISIS, like Iraq's elite Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) and the effective Syrian Kurd People's Defense Units (YPG),

desperately needed advisory support, training, and equipment.⁸ She offered that the insertion of embedded SOF teams into these indigenous formations would have a two-fold effect. First, it would bring SF detachments to the frontlines of the conflict where they could assess the combat effectiveness of partner units and implement corrective measures. Second, the commitment would organize the multiple entities combatting ISIS under the de facto leadership banner of the US. Therefore, the US military would be able to better coordinate and conduct the campaign.⁹ This would grant the US more control over the strategic outcome.

Researchers with the RAND Corporation reached the same conclusion and concurred that the most effective course of action was to utilize SOF to advise and assist local forces already battling ISIS. They would be assisted by a combination of robust US airpower and an aggressive information campaign designed to influence and shape the conditions on the ground. This “light rollback strategy” would also address traditionally non-military efforts such as underlying grievances and local government capacity.¹⁰ However, this approach represented a departure from the traditional US military preference of employing overwhelming firepower and combined arms maneuver to achieve its operational objectives.

The choice to employ small footprint SOF in lieu of larger conventional US forces was based not only upon the unique competencies possessed by SOF, but on political, fiscal, and popular constraints. Tianchi Wu addressed these constraints when he wrote that the strategy was one based on “Lightness,” or conducting the counter-ISIS campaign in a manner to make the

⁸ Robinson, Linda. "ISIS Vs Special Ops: One Half of a Good Strategy." *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-12-07/isis-vs-special-ops>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Jones, Seth G., James Dobbins, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, and Nathan Chandler. *Rolling Back the Islamic State*. Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2017. [https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/\[SITE_ID\]/detail.action?docID=4853015](https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/[SITE_ID]/detail.action?docID=4853015), pg. 54-58.

“protracted employment of land power sustainable over time, both fiscally and in the court of public opinion.”¹¹ The US could not fully utilize the full extent of its military prowess against ISIS. The battlefield effects against ISIS might have been quickly evident, but political realities did not allow for another large-scale deployment of US troops to a conflict in the Middle East.

Instead, the US needed an approach that worked within force level constraints, utilized partner nation ground forces, employed SOF, leveraged US airpower, recognized coalition contributions, and practiced cost management.¹² This reliance on many other factors outside of the direct control of US military commanders meant that the strategy required a different type of variable in order to succeed: time. A strategy based on lightness permitted the US military to employ a SOF-centric approach with the flexibility of time to alter the conditions across the battlespace and begin the rollback of ISIS.

Wu notes that this strategy was not only applicable to the situation with ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The strategy of lightness offered a blueprint for addressing similar challenges in the future. In future conflicts when the US had interests in “securing and defending territory on land where institutions of civil life can survive... U.S. strategy can conduct a gradual procession toward this end, establishing coherence between operational ways and domestic means.”¹³ SOF operations conducted during OIR would test this approach for its feasibility in the future. However, this type of strategy was not without its detractors.

¹¹ Wu, Tianchi. “Landpower, Time, and Terrorism: A Strategy of Lightness in the Counter-ISIS Campaign.” *Orbis* 62, no. 2 (Feb 02, 2018): 278-293. doi:10.1016/j.orbis.2018.02.004. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2018.02.004>, pg. 280.

¹² *Ibid*, pg. 281-284.

¹³ *Ibid*, pg. 292.

The Case Against

Not all US policymakers and stakeholders believed such a light approach was sufficient in confronting the threat possessed by ISIS. Some were concerned that the US was limiting itself with a light strategy. John Weaver voiced concern that, “the US military cannot address the threat unilaterally and under excessive restraints on its power.”¹⁴ Instead, he maintained that the US needed to fully commit the totality of its diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (D.I.M.E.) power to the complete and irrefutable destruction of ISIS. The DoD would be the primary component, but various other US government agencies such as the Department of State and Justice Department needed to be involved from the beginning for a comprehensive and whole of government approach to the problem. This required a more comprehensive mustering of all applicable US resources and a more thorough political commitment to the defeat of ISIS and the conditions on the ground that gave birth its rise.

Critics also targeted the deliberately low number of US military forces allocated to the effort. Proponents argued that any effective offensive against ISIS needed a much larger commitment of US ground troops. Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham called for 10,000 troops in Iraq and an equal number in Syria so the US could fully prosecute the war in the fashion it chose without relying upon external actors for assistance.¹⁵ A number of individuals and institutes published reports or assessments that also expressed skepticism of the policy options being debated. Kevin Benson argued neither the light approach nor the 20,000 troops called for by Senators McCain and Graham were realistic in their appraisal of the situation. He

¹⁴ John Weaver. “The Perils of a Piecemeal Approach to Fighting ISIS in Iraq.” *Public Administration Review* 75, no. 2 (Mar 01, 2015): 192-193. doi:10.1111/puar.12351. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24757410>, pg. 193.

¹⁵ Committee on Armed Services. United States Policy and Strategy in the Middle East. 114-350 Cong., First sess., Oct 27, 2015. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg21401/html/CHRG-114shrg21401.htm>.

argued the offensive against ISIS first needed to be conceived by military planners with no limitations to their manpower requirements. Any proposals necessitating low or specific troop numbers catered to political demands but ignored military realities and jeopardized success.¹⁶ Similar concerns were infamously dismissed by the Bush administration prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. As a result, US military commanders were left with insufficient troop levels to stabilize the country and contain the rising civil unrest and budding insurgency. These critics did not believe a SOF approach to be preferable as they believed sufficiently defeating ISIS would require a high number of US troops.

¹⁶ Benson, Kevin. "10,000 Won't do it: The Mathematics of an American Deployment to Fight ISIL." <https://warontherocks.com/2016/01/10000-wont-do-it-the-mathematics-of-an-american-deployment-to-fight-isil/>.

Methods

This research study will employ a methodology based upon deductive research to review the three core competencies nested within the SOF approach in the Lightness Strategy that enabled the success of SOF during OIR. The review will be a qualitative analysis involving the examination of documentation from a broad range of data sources. The discussion will illustrate why this strategy was effective in dismantling the Islamic State's caliphate, rendering it without territorial holdings within a span of three years, and how these competencies could be needed again. The organization framework begins with an introduction to what made ISIS successful and proceed to a forecast of the global security environment. Then the three SOF branches, their core competencies, and their potential application in the future will be discussed.

1) The Islamic State (2014–2015)

- Military Effectiveness
- Governance
- Propaganda

2) The Threats of Tomorrow

- What will be the future operating environment?
- How does SOF contribute?

2) Introduction of SOF Branch and its Core Competency

- Which SOF branch performs this competency?
- What is their mission and composition?
- How do they nest within a SOF-centric Lightness Strategy?

3) Utilization of SOF Branch during OIR

- How was the competency utilized during OIR?
- Which partner force/organization was it by, with, or through?
- What was the result?

4) Implications for Future Conflicts

- How is the global environment changing?
- What potential conflict or scenario will need this capability?
- Which unit within the SOF Branch is best suited to respond?

All three of these competencies were performed in unison with each other by multiple SOF units throughout the campaign. Each was one piece of a multipronged effort specifically tailored to disrupting or defeating an aspect or strength of ISIS. It should be noted that these competencies had an outsized impact, but they alone were not responsible for the success of OIR. A vast array of international military and government entities possessing a broad range of capabilities and proficiencies contributed to the campaign against ISIS.

However, the competencies reviewed in this research study are primarily executed by SOF organizations, and they alone possess the official authorities and experience to best conduct them. SOF will again be called upon to utilize these capabilities in future conflicts that resemble many of the conditions present during OIR: a non-state or quasi-state threat, indigenous forces as the main effort, and degraded or non-existent friendly governance. This is what informs the implications for future conflicts.

Data

Various commands within the DoD, such as subcomponents within the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and United States Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (USAJFKSWCS), produced their own material on SOF operations in Iraq and Syria in the form of ‘lessons learned’ and short reports called “white papers.” These primary source materials, usually written by the very units on the ground, were meant to summarize and package past tactical and operational experience into useful monographs. Tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) that were decidedly successful are most prevalent in circulation. They are then distributed and available across the joint force to better inform SOF operators expecting to deploy to the region and continue the fight against ISIS. These accounts were particularly useful in illustrating the Governance competency and how Civil Affairs performed their core competency in the midst of OIR.

Numerous government-funded or affiliated institutes, such as the RAND Corporation and Joint Special Operations University (JSOU), offered more in-depth reports and utilized academics and researchers to comb across available data and provide analysis at the operation and strategic levels. This is typically accompanied by recommendations or proposed courses of actions for US policymakers or senior military leaders depending upon the report’s intended audience. These reports were typically authored by individuals possessing a military background, advanced degrees in relevant fields, experience within the defense policy community, or a combination of all three. They offered particular insight into how SOF operations during OIR fit within a broader context by using historical analysis and exploring future applications based upon their outlook of future global trends.

Other institutes and individuals, specializing in research or policy, offered similar assessments designed for a wide variety of audiences. Their studies may specifically address the effectiveness of the US military's campaign against ISIS and the unique competencies SOF was able to contribute. Similarly, their concentration may indirectly relate to SOF by addressing other aspects. These include reports on the quality of indigenous security forces trained and fighting alongside SOF, such as the Iraqi Army (IA) or Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This was chiefly useful in examining the effectiveness of the Foreign Internal Defense competency. Others took a more holistic view by relating the counter-ISIS campaign to on-going and future challenges that require increased security cooperation between the US and partner forces.

Mass media surrounded ISIS since it rose to global notoriety with stories of their atrocities and filmed executions. International media played a major role in documenting the counter-offensive against ISIS. US journalists and news networks were invested in providing coverage since the beginning of OIR. They reported in the prelude to the operation regarding the spread of ISIS and on the discourse in the US as to the extent that the Obama administration would intervene. Other domestic and international outlets with a focus on Middle Eastern affairs maintained their coverage through the ebb and flow of the US news cycle. All of these sources contributed to the reporting of SOF operations conducted against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and the degree to which the conflict was altered by 2018.

Some of the most unofficial yet illuminating sources of information came from SOF veterans themselves. Social media, blog posts, and published books all served as an informal database of literature where SOF operators recounted their experiences fighting ISIS. The written experiences of these service members displayed the reality of the situation on the ground and the successes and failures of the strategies that were implemented. These sources offered some of the

best recounts of Information Operations conducted at the tactical level and the tactics employed in partnership with Iraqi and Kurdish forces. They offered an unfiltered perspective into the daily operations conducted by all of the SOF branches against ISIS from the initiation of OIR until the cessation of major operations approximately two years ago. US forces and their regional partners remain engaged in the fight against ISIS. However, the terror group no longer threatens the US or its allies as it did at the height of its power.

Lastly, a myriad of academic and institutional sources assisted in theorizing the future operating environment that SOF is likely to contend with. Casual observers were shocked by the seemingly phenomenal rise of ISIS, from a band of Sunni extremists in Northern Iraq to a declared caliphate with substantial territorial holdings. However, that advent did correspond to the observable trend of major non-state actors rising across the region and the globe to contribute to the on-going rise of inner-state conflicts. These studies and reports assisted with assembling possible scenarios in the near future when SOF will have to respond to such challenges again. Many of these sources, both government and private, acknowledge this trend is occurring simultaneously with the return of a more aggressive Russia and rising China. Their findings suggest that the core competencies found within SOF will be an essential component of a US response to any threat faced in the future.

The Islamic State (2014–2015)

Military Effectiveness

The fall of Mosul in June 2014 sent shockwaves through the US political and defense establishments. They wondered how a security force of nearly 60,000 Iraqi soldiers and police could lose the country's second largest city to a force of approximately a thousand after nearly a decade of continued US support in arms and training.¹⁷ This feat of arms was rather remarkable given the disparity between numbers, but it was mostly made possible due to hollowed out nature of the security forces. The Iraqi Army was plagued by corruption and politicization which left its forces demoralized and unprepared to defend northern Iraq.¹⁸ As a result, they disintegrated against a motivated and determined foe that appeared to be attacking from everywhere at once.

ISIS did possess a wide array of advantages that allowed it to become some formidable on the battlefield between 2014 and its height in 2015. A number of former Hussein regime Baathists with military and intelligence experience fought for different Sunni insurgencies before joining ISIS. The fight against the U.S. occupation was key in "bringing militants like (ISIS leader) al-Baghdadi into contact with former Saddam officers, including members of special forces, the elite Republican Guard and the paramilitary force called Fedayeen."¹⁹ Veteran jihadists from Chechnya and other global hotspots arrived to offer their expertise to the caliphate. The US needed to increase the effectiveness of local forces if there was any chance of success.

¹⁷ Chulov, Martin, Fazel Hawramy, and Spencer Ackerman. "Iraq Army Capitulates to Isis Militants in Four Cities." *The Guardian*, Jun 11, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/mosul-isis-gunmen-middle-east/>

¹⁸ Fraiman, Keren, Austin Long, and Caitlin Talmadge. "Why the Iraqi Army Collapsed (and what can be done about it)." *The Washington Post*, Jun 13, 2014. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/13/why-the-iraqi-army-collapsed-and-what-can-be-done-about-it/>.

¹⁹ Hendawi, Hamza and Qassim Zahra. "There's One Major Reason Why ISIS has been so Successful." *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/theres-one-major-reason-why-isis-has-been-so-successful-2015-8>.

Governance

The establishment of Islamic governance was one of the first objectives of ISIS as it swept across the Levant in 2014. The 2003 invasion of Iraq and the Syrian Civil War severely degraded the ability of both countries' central governments to effectively control events within their borders and to enforce their sovereignty. Non-state entities exploited this vulnerability and provided local, unofficial governance along sectarian or tribal identity lines. ISIS, composed of ultra-radical Sunni Muslims, became the most powerful of these entities and sought to bring all the major inhabitants of the region—Sunnis, Shiites, Arabs, Kurds, and Christians—under their control. The group subjected these populations to strict form of Sharia Law, rooted in 8th century Islam, to establish a society according to their fundamentalist religious beliefs.

In Iraq, ISIS governance “peaked in fall 2014 at an estimated 6.3 million people (19 percent of the population) covering approximately 58,372 km² (13 percent of Iraq’s territory).”²⁰ In Syria, they were “controlling an estimated 3.3 million people (14 percent of the population) in fall 2014 covering an area of roughly 47,497 km² (25 percent of the territory).”²¹ The tide began to turn against ISIS as Iraqi, Kurdish, and coalition forces advanced across previously occupied territories. Many were home to populations that were disenfranchised from their own national governments or were communities that were accustomed to their own rule until the arrival of ISIS. They were skeptical of liberating forces based upon differences of ethnicity or religion. Trust in governance was needed to combat the conditions that enabled the rise of ISIS.

²⁰ Jones, Seth G., James Dobbins, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, and Nathan Chandler. *Rolling Back the Islamic State*. Santa Monica, California: The RAND Corporation, 2017. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1900/RR1912/RAND_RR1912.pdf, pg. 20.

²¹ *Ibid*, pg. 20.

Propaganda

ISIS emerged not only across the physical space of northern Iraq and Syria but onto the digital space as well. The group was the most online-prolific Salafi Jihadist entity the world had seen. Their online army fully exploited the capabilities of the Information Age and mounted a public outreach campaign to spread their prophetic message across the global media landscape. Thousands of online profiles, webpages, and accounts attributed to the group flooded the internet with their messaging and narratives. Their information operations represented “a full-fledged embrace of the most current communications technology. ISIS boasts thousands of Twitter accounts spreading its message in several different languages, videos with Hollywood-like effects, and an adept command of various other social media platforms and Internet websites.”²²

Approximately 40,000 foreign fighters from 110 countries responded to the ISIS call to come to Iraq and Syria to fight for the caliphate.²³ Sympathetic donors from across the world wired and transferred funding to the group to further enable their war machine. “Lone wolf” terrorists, inspired by ISIS execution videos, committed their own acts of wanton violence throughout the Middle East, Europe, and locations as far away as San Bernardino, California. The seemingly unrelenting terrorist attacks shocked global audiences. The group was “masterful at capitalizing off of the West’s post-9/11 political discourse... messaging the fact that Western Muslims have been politically and socially marginalized since 9/11.”²⁴ The coalition had to compete in the information domain if the ISIS narrative was to be diminished.

²² Lieberman, Ariel Victoria. “Terrorism, the Internet, and Propaganda: A Deadly Combination.” *Journal of National Security Law & Policy* 9, no. 95 (2017): 95-124. https://jnslp.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Terrorism_the_Internet_and_Propaganda_FINAL.pdf, pg. 104.

²³ BBC. “IS Foreign Fighters: 5,600 have Returned Home - Report.” *The British Broadcasting Corporation*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41734069>.

²⁴ Pascarella, Matthew. “The Media World of ISIS.” (2019): 187-205. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvr7f8hp.13?seq=6#metadata_info_tab_contents, pg. 190.

The Threats of Tomorrow

The rise of ISIS was but one significant event occurring in the backdrop on an increasingly complex security environment. Experts forecast the US will be forced to contend with increased global instability while also engaging in Great Power Competition. Hostile non-state actors will continue to increase while fragile states turn towards authoritarianism, external exploitation, and succumb to the influence of Russia or China in both physical and digital spaces. The effects of climate change on vulnerable regions, rising global economic inequality, and the proliferation of mass communication technology all compound to exacerbate these trends.²⁵ These challenges are multifaceted in their nature and often intersect with one another. They pose a level of complexity that traditional warfighting alone cannot address.

The US is left with the conundrum of how best to manage these difficulties and determine when and to what extent it will intervene. Researchers with the RAND Corporation note this shift has already been underway and will only continue. The US reliance on SOF has increased dramatically over time as they are viewed by decision makers as the premier choice for missions ranging from train-and-assist, security cooperation, counterinsurgency, and peacekeeping and humanitarian activities. This is in contrast to the decline in the use of conventional combat arms troops and indicates a change in the way future ground operations will be conducted.²⁶ This research will present such hypothetical ground operations by demonstrating how Foreign Internal Defense could be required in Latin America, Support to Governance necessary in West Africa, and Information Operations performed in the Baltic States.

²⁵ U.S. Department of State. U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability Global Publishing Solutions, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/2020-us-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stabilit-508c-508/>, pg. 5.

²⁶ Kavanagh, Jennifer, Bryan Frederick, et al. The Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Ground Interventions: Identifying Trends, Characteristics, and Signposts. Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2017, pg. 297.

Special Forces: Foreign Internal Defense (FID)

Special Forces serve as the premier partnership force and the DoD's first choice for providing a military asset designed to work by, with, and through indigenous forces. They possess a range of capabilities designed to increase the effectiveness of allies through interaction at the tactical and operational levels. SF detachments also advise and assist their partners on the battlefield and accompany them to the frontline. The situation in Syria necessitated UW, "to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow a government or occupying power."²⁷ Kurdish forces served as that resistance movement to the proto-ISIS state. In Iraq, SF partnered with Iraqi security forces to implement FID, "to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism and other threats to its security."²⁸

Each soldier on an Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) is responsible for a unique specialty in addition to their mastery of basic infantry skills. Communications, weapons, engineering, and medical knowledge are all brought to bear and taught to partner forces. This transforms an ODA to force-multiplier as they are able to transform local conscripts or fighters into more competent soldiers. At higher echelons, SF officers and senior Non-commissioned officers use their experience to advise the partnered leadership on how to best employ their forces. This makes them ideal in a strategy of lightness. US policymakers knew "while American troops might be able to more quickly clear Raqqa, Mosul, and other Islamic State territory, using American troops to hold, stabilize, and reconstruct these areas could quickly become a financial and bloody burden."²⁹ The ODAs became the primary ground effort to turn the tide against ISIS.

²⁷ (U.S. Army Special Operations Command, 2017) pg. 10

²⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 10.

²⁹ (Jones, Dobbins, et. al., 2017) pg. 53.

Utilization during OIR

US military planners realized that they needed a competent partner to spearhead the ground component before counter-offensive against ISIS in Iraq could begin. The regular Iraqi Army (IA) and assorted security forces, primarily trained by conventional US forces, were shown to be incapable during the fall of Mosul. ISIS continued to march south to the outskirts of Baghdad and by the fall of 2014 “had overrun much of the country and was settling in to become a terrorist-insurgency group... the U.S. needed to switch from rapidly building a conventional large ground force to recruiting, training, and preparing Iraqi counter-terrorism forces.”³⁰ The Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) was found to be the most capable.

SOF partnered with CTS and embarked upon a remarkable reversal in ground operations. SF continued to model CTS into an Iraqi version of itself: a small, elite organization of well-equipped and superior trained soldiers that can be reliably called upon to perform any task. ODAs attached themselves to CTS at multiple echelons and ensured a system of checks and balances, helped to limit sectarianism and politicization, enforced training standards, provided operational advice to leaders, and improved overall effectiveness.”³¹ In addition to their organic assets, the ODAs augmented CTS with Close Air Support (CAS), intelligence, and logistical support to further increase their own survivability and lethality against the enemy. CTS and their accompanying ODAs led the liberation of Tikrit, Beyji, Ramadi, and Mosul, thereby removing ISIS from all major Iraqi urban centers.³² The self-declared caliphate was effectively landless.

³⁰ Baron, Kevin. “The Military Loves the Obama Doctrine. Can it Survive Trump?” *Defense One*. <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/01/special-report-military-loves-obama-doctrine-can-it-survive-trump/134609/>.

³¹ Witty, David. *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*. The Brookings Institute, 2017, pg. 40.

³² Knights, Michael and Alex Mello. “The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service and the Long War Against Militancy.” *War on the Rocks*. <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/the-best-thing-america-built-in-iraq-iraqs-counter-terrorism-service-and-the-long-war-against-militancy/>.

Implications for Future Conflicts

The US will remain the preeminent military power among the world's states for the foreseeable future. It has continually demonstrated its ability to inflict severe losses to those opponents that present themselves as susceptible to conventional military capabilities. Therefore, hostile states and non-state actors will seek to avoid direct military confrontation. Adversaries will continue to sow unrest throughout Central Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, undermining regional stability and threatening U.S. and allied interests.³³ The strategy of lightness centered on SF is uniquely suited to contend with future threats in an uncertain environment at a lower political and economic cost.

A scenario may emerge far closer to the mainland that will challenge the DoD to employ a capability that is proficient at operating amongst remnants of a hostile state and non-state actors. The island nation of Cuba lies a mere 90 miles south of US territory and in the middle end of what meteorologists refer to as Hurricane Alley. The island's location leaves it dangerously exposed to adverse weather conditions. In 1963 the new constituted communist state mobilized nearly the entire active military, reserves, citizen militias, and municipal-level networks of pro-government organizers to assist with evacuations and relief efforts after Hurricane Flora.³⁴ The increased effects of climate change aggravate this vulnerability and pose a distinct threat to Cuba's political and economic livelihood. A future storm could upend the political control the current regime exerts over the country while still mobilizing much of the state apparatus.

³³ Evans, Alexandra and Alexandra Stark. "Bad Idea: Assuming the Small Wars Era is Over." *CSIS International Security Program*. https://defense360.csis.org/bad-idea-assuming-the-small-wars-era-is-over/?fbclid=IwAR0uDmxBue_ABjQ_BQ5nGA2OjlkHFERh18j6lb-yR0KymjICQkTSSw1DZi4.

³⁴ Gettig, Eric. "How Hurricanes Helped Shape Modern Cuba." *Foreign Affairs* (Oct 03, 2017). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/central-america-caribbean/2017-10-03/how-hurricanes-helped-shape-modern-cuba>.

The division or full collapse of the Castro regime in Havana would result in the most perilous security situation for the US in the Western Hemisphere since the formation of the communist state. US policymakers will be compelled to address deteriorating conditions and the DoD would likely be the first USG entity to fully establish an overt presence in the aftermath. The 7th Special Forces Group would assume the lead effort in identifying and working with local factions they assess as being credible partners in reestablishing security and order. The 7th SFG is regionally aligned to Latin America and its members are Spanish speakers with cultural competence. They will need these skills to advise and assist initially neutral to friendly groups that are amenable to cooperation with the US. This could begin by forming a partnership with a potentially armed wing of the Patriotic Union of Cuba (UNPACU), currently the largest and most active pro-democracy opposition party, organizing itself in a collapsed Cuba.³⁵

ODAs from 7th SFG would find themselves navigating a complex post-disaster environment that will contain grave security threats. The Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) and domestic intelligence agencies occupy a center role in suppressing domestic dissent and wield deep influence over virtually every aspect of the state.³⁶ They have spent nearly 60 years preparing for a hypothetical US invasion. Their members and other Castro regime loyalists will loot armories and blend into the population, much like the initial Iraqi insurgency. These heavily armed forces will disrupt the arrival of humanitarian assistance while complicating stability operations as ISIS attempted. The ODAs will be well served by their experiences working with locally raised Iraqi and Kurdish forces to counter such a formidable threat.

³⁵ Roth, Kenneth. *Cuba: Events of 2019*: Humans Rights Watch, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/cuba#>.

³⁶ Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2020 - Cuba*: Freedom House, 2020. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/cuba/freedom-world/2020>.

Civil Affairs: Support to Governance

Civil Affairs provides SOF with the capacity to support friendly or partner nation governance during contingencies reliant upon the existence of capable governance for the U.S. to achieve its broader strategic objectives. Support to governance has the twofold effect of better enabling US military operations while also enhancing local perceptions of US military personnel and their mission. CA operators are often the first US service members to “identify critical infrastructure, and they can develop local civil networks that support U.S. efforts... these efforts contribute toward a common understanding with interorganizational partners, which provides opportunities for all stakeholders to develop ways to mitigate civil vulnerabilities that complement U.S. military and whole-of-government objectives.”³⁷

Military operations utilizing a SOF-centric approach or strategy of lightness do not have the ability to call upon large amounts of manpower or resources to dedicate towards interacting, controlling, or otherwise attempting to influence the civilian populations that live within the battlespace. Civil Affairs Teams (CAT) are tailor trained for this purpose. These teams of four utilize their knowledge of local socio-political dynamics to identify and forge relationships with influential individuals and within existing power structures. CATs also assist their SOF counterparts in developing better understanding of the historic grievances and current conditions that often serves as catalyst to conflict. They act as an initial liaison to the diplomatic and developmental support offered by USG Interagency Community (IC) and perform in that role until conditions on the ground permit the arrival of further support.

³⁷ Raza, Assad. “Order from Chaos: Inside U.S. Army Civil Affairs Activities.” *Military Review* Nov-Dec 2019, (2019): 19-27. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/ND-19/Raza-Order-from-Chaos.pdf>, pg. 20.

Utilization during OIR

CATs accompanied indigenous forces and other SOF elements as the offensive against ISIS pushed through northern Iraq and Syria. During 2016 coalition forces liberated increasingly large swaths of territory inhabited by multiethnic populations that suffered under ISIS rule. Governance had to be reestablished to begin the long process of reconstruction. The northeastern Syrian cities of Manbij, Kobani, and the former ISIS capital Raqqa were such places. Essential services were non-existent and civilian infrastructure lay in ruin after recent fighting. CATs were tasked to “assume the lead for implementing stabilization activities until it was feasible to transition lead responsibility back to other U.S. government departments and agencies.”³⁸ They were the first responders and responsible for reestablishing a semblance of order.

CA operators assisted in the development of civil councils in these cities to better identify and address civil vulnerabilities. Local populations sent forth members from both Kurdish and Arab communities that conveyed the needs of their constituents. These councils met with CATs who reported conditions on the ground to both CENTCOM and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for higher coordination.³⁹ Their work “created the gold standard for the interagency community writ large in informing and unify a whole-of-government approach.”⁴⁰ The civil councils provided regional and international NGOs with a functioning body through which they could orchestrate the delivery of humanitarian assistance. This was key in convincing vulnerable populations of the legitimacy of the coalition and secured cooperation against ISIS.

³⁸ Brau, Peter. “Civil Authority in Manbij, Syria: Using Civil Affairs to Implement Stabilization Activities in Nonpermissive Environments.” *Military Review Online Exclusive* (Feb, 2019). <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Army-Press-Online-Journal/documents/2019/Brau-1.pdf>, pg. 2.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 7.

⁴⁰ Brau, Peter. “Consolidating Gains in Northeast Syria: A Whole-of-Government Approach to Evaluating Civil Authority.” *Military Review* Mar-Apr 2020, (2020): 96-105. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MA-20/Brau-Consolidating-Gains.pdf>, pg. 105.

Implications for Future Conflicts

Contemporary wars are increasingly intra-state and internationalized conflicts fought by non-state actors. Non-state actors, such as ISIS, increasingly resort to armed violence to adjust or supplant existing governance structures. These groups possess historical grievances they seek addressed or aim to become the state outright. Conflicts of these sort draw the attention and participation of the international community as developing states are unable to fully contend with the threats from within their own borders. President Obama noted the “‘supply of well-trained, well-equipped peacekeepers can’t keep up with the growing demand’ and promised renewed support for peace operations, mostly in the form of military experts, training, and resources.” CA is uniquely suited as the SOF contribution to these developing challenges.⁴¹

The Lake Chad Basin is such a region heading towards major destabilization and will require US assistance to local governance. This ecoregion comprises portions of Chad, Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon. The region suffers from food insecurity, inter-state disagreements, terrorism, population displacement, and the effects of climate change.⁴² Currently these states do not possess the political and economic means to exert governance throughout the whole of their borders. This opening allows armed non-state actors like Boko Haram to contend with regional governments for control in neglected areas. These groups will gain in their influence and reach as conditions are exacerbated and more followers join their cause. The threat is likely to multiply if they are able to capture and provide governance to increased amounts of territory like ISIS.

⁴¹ Gao, George. “UN Peacekeeping at New Highs After Post-Cold War Surge and Decline.”

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/02/un-peacekeeping-at-new-highs-after-post-cold-war-surge-and-decline/>.

⁴² Usigbe, Leon. “Drying Lake Chad Basin Gives Rise to Crisis.” *Africa Renewal* Dec 2019 - Mar 2020, (Dec 24, 2019). <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2019-march-2020/drying-lake-chad-basin-gives-rise-crisis>.

The 91st Civil Affairs Battalion is the organization specifically qualified to lead the SOF portion of any organized DoD response to this multifaceted situation. This unit has maintained a constant presence in Northwest and West Africa since 2009 and has developed strong working relationships with the Department of State (DoS), international NGOs, and partner nation officials and security forces on the ground. CATs are, “the most effective assets on the ground as they integrate with ongoing DoS and USAID efforts to support stability through diplomatic and developmental means... (their approach) integrates a small footprint, builds reliable relationships, and develops effective plans that address critical vulnerabilities in under-governed spaces.”⁴³ The CATs of the 91st CA BN, with their access and placement, offer DoD planners an asset with which they may construct a larger response in the case of a declared crisis and a US response. Their knowledge of the human terrain and existing networks will prove invaluable to utilize.

The future offers no shortage of plausible scenarios requiring the deployment of CATs to complex operating environments. Conflicts stemming from political or economic inequality, social differences, or environmental changes and disasters all threaten to disrupt fragile states. Vulnerable populations “may become reliant on external actors to prop up governance systems, provide security, and deliver essential services to their population.”⁴⁴ Many will pose a threat to US allies or a national security threat to the US homeland itself. The US will need to address these challenges aware of its own restraints as a heavy response with ground forces may only exacerbate the situation. However, the SOF-centric approach allows specially trained CA operators to work through local partners to support governance in pursuit of strategic objectives.

⁴³ Liggett, Chris. “It is Time for Civil Affairs to Lead Special Operations in Northwest Africa.” *Small Wars Journal*. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/it-time-civil-affairs-lead-special-operations-northwest-africa>.

⁴⁴ (U.S. Department of State, 2020) pg. 5

Psychological Operations: Information Operations

SOF boasts of such a capability in the form of its Psychological Operations (PSYOP) groups. SOF relies upon these specially trained soldiers to “convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals.”⁴⁵ PSYOP soldiers have become increasingly important with the global mass proliferation of online capable handheld devices that allow for the instantaneous delivery of information. Opposing parties must now compete to control the narrative of developing events throughout the 24-hour news cycle. PSYOP fulfills this role for an SOF operation currently underway.

PSYOP operators perform their mission in Military Information Support Teams (MIST) or often as a part of a larger combined element, like their other SOF brethren. MISTs use both primitive and the latest technological innovations and various modes of communication to “degrade the enemy’s relative combat power, reduce civilian interference, minimize collateral damage, and maximize the local populace’s support for operations.”⁴⁶ They rely upon language training, regional awareness, and the assistance of local partners to tailor their messaging to influence targeted audiences most efficiently and effectively. Their skill set is paramount to success in a strategy of lightness. Having limited amounts of ground troops severely constrains the ability to influence the behaviors of known adversaries or neutral populations within the area of operations. MISTs provide military commanders with that capability but maintain a lighter footprint and perform their competency at a lower cost.

⁴⁵ (U.S. Army Special Operations Command, 2017) pg. 10.

⁴⁶ Alvarez, John, Robert Nalepa, Anna-Marie Wyant, and Fred Zimmerman. Special Operations Forces Reference Manual. Tampa, Florida: Joint Special Operations University, 2015.
https://www.socom.mil/JSOU/JSOUPublications/2015SOFRefManual_final_cc.pdf, pg. 3-11.

Utilization during OIR

MISTs were present with Iraqi and Kurdish forces as they engaged in urban fighting to liberate townships and cities from ISIS rule. This sort of urban warfare required bitter block by block fighting, often at a heavy cost to US partners. MISTs provided assistance by engaging in tactical-level support during clearing operations. PSYOP soldiers deployed loudspeakers to bombard ISIS fighters in defensive positions with noise designed to prevent them from coordinating, keep them from resting, or otherwise make them disheveled.⁴⁷ In other occasions, the teams used direct electronic or audio messaging to implore fighters to abandon the ISIS cause. These types of tactical-level actions saved the lives of countless Iraqi and Kurdish soldiers as they made ISIS fighters less effective or more prone to surrender.

Information Operations were also in demand at higher echelons up to the strategic level. The US sought to counter ISIS messaging across the internet and social media by creating and managing their own accounts. Initially, “most of the anti-ISIS propaganda was put out by the US government... (but was soon) produced in Arabic by Muslim governments and local religious leaders and advocacy groups, increasing its effectiveness.”⁴⁸ This online presence enabled coalition forces to combat ISIS narratives while providing daily facts and figures detailing the collapse of ISIS. The aggressive propaganda campaign, combined with a partnership with Twitter to remove ISIS affiliated accounts, led to a 45% drop in pro-ISIS Twitter traffic by mid-2016.⁴⁹ PSYOP soldiers contributed from the local to international level in muting ISIS.

⁴⁷ Trevithick, Joseph. “U.S. Psyops Blasted ISIS with Recordings of Crying, Troops Retreating, and Other Confusing Audio.” *Brookline Media*. <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/25504/u-s-psyops-blasted-isis-with-recordings-of-crying-troops-retreating-and-other-confusing-audio>.

⁴⁸ Quigley, Aidan. “Why has Pro-ISIS Twitter Traffic Dropped 45 Percent in Two Years?” *The Christian Science Monitor*. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2016/0710/Why-has-pro-ISIS-Twitter-traffic-dropped-45-percent-in-two-years>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Implications for Future Conflicts

The world continues to grow more interconnected as the ability to communicate with anyone at any time spans every corner of the globe. Technologies and platforms initially developed for Western consumers are increasingly available to a worldwide audience. Social media will give a magnified voice to those who exploit it. Its reach is “expanding the causes and possibly the incidence of war and extending its reach... as platforms reinforce ‘us versus them’ narratives, expose vulnerable people to virulent ideologies, and inflame even long-dormant hatreds.”⁵⁰ If the US were to fall drastically behind any adversary in its influence capabilities, it might lose the next conflict or war before it begins.

The US faces such a challenge in the influence domain in the Baltic States. Russia seeks to exert itself throughout its former Soviet states bordering its near-peripheral, especially the independent states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. All three states contain sizeable ethnic Russian populations, and their political and social vulnerabilities are well-known to Moscow. The Russian military is developing “rapid reaction, highly deployable units alongside well-trained information warfare staff and a state-controlled media infrastructure... (with) a brutal strategy of intimidating and silencing its critics.”⁵¹ This capability is designed to use the latest technologies and methods to perform information warfare at the local and regional level for strategic effect. In case of a crisis, the Baltics will quickly be inundated with false information that is designed to overload the civil populations’ ability to accurately interpret events.

⁵⁰ Brooking, Emerson T. and P. W. Singer. "War Goes Viral: How Social Media is being Weaponized Across the World." *The Atlantic* (Nov, 2016). <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/11/war-goes-viral/501125/>.

⁵¹ Paul, Christopher, Colin P. Clarke, Michael Schwille, Michael A. Brown, Steven S. Davenport, and Issac R. Porche III. *Lessons from Others for Future U.S. Army Operations in and through the Information Environment*. Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2018. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1925z1.html, pg. 38

Russian operatives will possess the ability to identify and exploit opportunities available in the information sphere using their knowledge of on-going events in Baltic society. In response, MISTs must be ready to respond and immediately employ its own information operations. The US currently maintains units from the 6th Psychological Operations Battalion on a rotational basis to the region to continually deter against any future Russian aggression. These MISTs are an important component to these deployments and partner in military-to-military cooperative efforts, produce military-focused publications, and participate in subject-matter expert exchanges.⁵² All of these programs are designed to increase the interoperability and coordination of military information support efforts between the US and its Baltic allies.

A near-peer threat like Russia has the capability to brandish the whole of its military and state apparatus during any information campaign aimed at disrupting the Baltic States. However, the fundamentals of Information Operations that were implemented and honed against ISIS will still prove useful in countering propaganda and misinformation. PSYOP soldiers must work to build and maintain a close working relationship with their Baltic partners so their own counterpropaganda and disseminated messaging is best tailored to the targeted audience. Baltic soldiers tasked with Information Operations are currently benefiting from the real-world experience of their US counterparts and continually enhancing mutual trust and civil-military cooperation during ongoing training.⁵³ The US must continue to train its own soldiers and those of its allies in conducting Information Operations to be successful on any future battlefield. The successful outcome of a strategy using SOF and based upon lightness depends upon it.

⁵² U.S. European Command Public Affairs Office. MISO Fact Sheet 2020.

⁵³ Flanagan, Stephen J., Jan Osburg, et al. *Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States through Resilience and Resistance*. Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2019.
https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/RR2779/RAND_RR2779.pdf, pg. 13.

Conclusion

The National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2017 and the National Defense Strategy (NDS) of 2018 introduced the concept of Great Power Competition to defense scholars and practitioners. Both documents seek to set aside the more than 15-year emphasis on Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) to instead focus on “near-peer” threats stemming from a revisionist Russia and a rising China. This has led some to the conclusion that the US needs to return to its traditional warfighting competencies of employing overwhelming firepower and combined arms maneuver to win the next conflict. Some believe that a Strategy of Lightness employing a SOF-centric approach is not sufficient to achieve the nation’s objectives. However, these detractors would be incorrect.

The US is currently in the midst of significant domestic challenges, from the COVID-19 pandemic to political polarization. The DoD is likely to enter an extended period of strained fiscal budgets. Nevertheless, it must continue to offer solutions to policymakers for the geopolitical challenges that are currently emerging and the ones that are yet to reveal themselves. The Strategy of Lightness still offers the best option for managing the extremities of the 21st global environment short of all-out declared war. The capabilities displayed during OIR best represent the continued trajectory of modern conflict, as opposed to a return to Gulf War I or World War II. The three SOF branches of SF, CA, and PSYOP must continue to collect institutional knowledge and learn from the OIR experiences of their former and still serving service members. These organizations need to continue to train and prepare to employ the same core competencies of Foreign Internal Defense, Support to Governance, and Information Operations in different environments, with diverse partners, against new threats. Their ability to do so will enable our ability to compete and win long into the future.

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Curriculum Vita

Andrew Alcocer is originally from Monterey, CA. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in History from University of Oregon in 2010 where he commissioned through Army ROTC as a second lieutenant in the Armor Branch. He served as an Armor Officer for five years including a deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom 12-13 before undergoing Civil Affairs selection and training. In 2016 he joined the 98th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) at Ft. Bragg, NC and proceeded to deploy in support of Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH) to Colombia in 2017 and Suriname in 2019. His next unit of assignment will be 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) at Ft. Campbell, KY.